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New Jersey Courts Dramatically Reduce Case Backlog

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New Jersey's courts are handling cases more expeditiously, according to the [New Jersey Judiciary Court Management Report, June 2001](#), released by Judge Richard J. Williams, administrative director of the courts. According to the report, backlogged court cases have dropped dramatically, from a 22 percent drop in civil case backlog to a 67 percent drop in domestic violence case backlog.

Statewide, filings in New Jersey's courts increased by 6,714 from 963,930 during the court year July 1999 through June 2000, to 970,644 during court year July 2000 to June 2001. At the same time, the backlog of cases in the state's courts dropped by 10,983 from 52,783 to 41,800, a 21 percent overall decrease.

"We are changing the culture of how the courts do business and setting new expectations for ourselves for the quality of services we offer to the public," said Judge Williams. "These results are well beyond what we had anticipated and the success is a direct result of the commitment of the assignment judges and presiding judges, together with the hard work of our trial judges and court managers. I am very proud of the judges and the court staff for their efforts," Williams said.

Chief Justice Deborah T. Poritz and Judge Williams, along with the state's 15 assignment judges representing the 21 counties, set reducing the number of cases in backlog as a major goal of the courts for the court year July 2000 through June 2001. Throughout the year, the assignment judges as well as the presiding judges of the courts' trial divisions devoted a portion of their monthly meeting agendas to examining the latest statistics and sharing approaches and techniques on how to reduce backlogs.

Case backlog in the Family Division was reduced by more than 50 percent in three major categories: The backlog of domestic violence cases dropped most dramatically, by 67 percent, from 640 cases to 213 cases. Domestic violence filings totaled 61,025 for the year. Delinquency cases came in at 82,627 filings and backlog was reduced by 52 percent, from 2,109 cases in backlog to 1,006 cases. And cases such as child support, custody and visitation, called "non-dissolution" cases, accounted for the highest number of Family Division filings at 151,365 and went from 1,656 cases to 808 cases in backlog, for a reduction of 51 percent. In addition, filings in divorce cases, called "dissolution" cases, totaled 60,943. Backlogged divorce cases dropped by 13 percent from 3,382 to 2,946.

"These numbers indicate outstanding success in reducing case backlog. And they set the stage for continued improvement in the coming year," Judge Williams said.

Of special note is the 22 percent reduction of civil cases in backlog. The drop of 7,041 actual backlogged civil cases is the greatest reduction in backlog of any of the case types handled by the courts. Civil cases accounted for 105,510 of the 970,644 cases filed in New Jersey's courts between July 1, 2000, and June 31, 2001. Last July, 32,603 civil cases were in backlog. By June 2001, that number had been reduced to 25,562. The reduction took place in the context of the

implementation of “Civil Best Practices,” a new system of classifying cases by complexity and setting specific timeframes for both attorneys and court staff to process the steps in a civil litigation. Civil best practices became operational in September 2001, bringing changes to the courts’ computer systems and to the way day-to-day business was conducted in the civil division.

“It is too early to make a final judgment on each change developed in civil best practices, but this is clear: These are good things happening in civil justice in New Jersey,” Williams said.

Special Civil Court cases, such as those involving landlord-tenant disputes, small claims, and claims for damages of up to \$10,000, came in at 413,912 filings for the court year. The backlog in special civil cases also dropped 22 percent, from 3,250 to 2,519.

General Equity Court filings came in at 4,954. Backlog for these cases involving lawsuits seeking some type of action or enforcement of rights, rather than monetary damages, was reduced by 20 percent, from 656 cases to 523 cases.

The criminal division added 53,392 filings. Backlogged cases remained about even at 6,564.

“This has been a very good year, for the courts certainly, but more importantly, for litigants and lawyers, because cases that drag on cost lawyers time and litigants money,” Williams said. “We have made major improvements on behalf of those who use the courts, but we are not finished. We have set our sights on more improvements in the upcoming court year.”

The report contains statistics for the court year July 1, 2000, through June 30, 2001, for all case types, with a statewide overview and county-by-county analysis. “Backlog” is a measurement of cases that go beyond the courts’ case processing goals of how long it should take from the date a case is filed until the date a case is resolved. Each case type has a specific timeframe for completion

[The report is available](#) on the Judiciary web site, www.judiciary.state.nj, or from the public affairs office at (609) 292-9580.

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